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# Volunteer board organizing to manage \$2.75 million

## The funds are for asbestos-related health care

By BRENT SHRUM  
Special to the Inter Lake

**LIBBY** — With the county rejected by W.R. Grace and the Environmental Protection Agency, a volunteer board is organizing to manage \$2.75 million for asbestos-related health care.

The money comes from a settlement between Grace and EPA that resolved an access dispute over Grace-controlled properties in the Libby area. The money is intended to pay for health-care needs not met

by Grace's existing medical plan for victims of asbestos-related disease.

The settlement requires the money to be managed by a non-profit corporation. Lincoln County had been moving toward accepting the money based on a preliminary nod from an EPA attorney, but concerns arose during a meeting last week between Grace and EPA officials.

The county commissioners called a meeting tonight to discuss forming a private non-profit corporation to manage the settlement money.

About two dozen people heard Allan Payne give a summary of the situation. Payne is a Helena attorney retained by the county to provide assistance in dealings with W.R. Grace and asbestos issues.

The settlement has been given preliminary approval by a federal judge in Missoula and has also been approved by a bankruptcy court. All that remains is for the paperwork to be resubmitted to the judge in Missoula for his signature. Once that happens, there is a 10-day deadline for an existing nonprofit corporation approved by Grace and the EPA to accept the money; otherwise Grace will appoint its own board.

If the community can agree on a group to receive the money, the EPA will offer support and Grace will likely give its approval, Payne said.

"It's a lot of work for them to put together their own organization," he said.

The EPA is willing to hold off on submitting the paperwork for a couple of weeks to allow a

local group to form, Payne said. "They're not going to hold it forever," he said.

The settlement agreement provides a broad definition of health benefits for which the money can be used, Payne said. Possibilities include continued screenings for people who have previously received negative or equivocal test results for asbestos-related disease, as well as various other medical expenses not met by Grace's health plan.

"The people who are going to sit on the board are going to have some very, very tough decisions to make on that," Payne said.

The group at today's meeting agreed on a rough outline of the types of people who should be on a seven- to nine-member board. Suggestions

included representatives of St. John's Lutheran Hospital, the Center for Asbestos Related Disease, the Community Health Center, the county health board, the Community Advisory Group; people with expertise in financial, legal, insurance and long-term health care issues; an educator; a member of the business community; a legislator; a senior citizen and at least one asbestos victim.

The county commissioners have scheduled a meeting for 2 p.m. today at the Veterans of Foreign Wars community hall to receive public comment and make a recommendation on the makeup of the board.

For more information, contact Bill Bischoff at 293-7781, ext. 201, or Ron Anderson or Deb Bertelsen at 293-7781, ext. 228.

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